



COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY
Lamar Smith, Chairman

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Statement of Space Subcommittee Chairman Brian Babin (R-Texas)

Charting a Course: Expert Perspectives on NASA's Human Exploration Proposals

Chairman Babin: Placing a man on the Moon and returning him safely is widely considered one of humanity's greatest achievements. It cemented America's leadership on the world stage and demonstrated our technological superiority during the Cold War. Since then, NASA has made steady progress towards learning to live and work in space with the space shuttle and space station.

Today we find ourselves at an intersection. Do we, as a nation, retreat from the cosmos, or do we take that next first step into the unknown? There appears to be consensus that the horizon goal of America's human exploration program is to land on the surface of Mars. But how will we get there? What are the intermediate stepping stones on that pathway to Mars? How do we avoid costly and avoidable detours? How do we ensure a sustainable program rather than a "one-off" stunt? And how do we ensure the next administration does not wipe the slate clean, erasing all the hard work of the last five years. These are all questions that we must address in this and future hearings.

The SLS and Orion systems are critical to the success of our deep space human exploration program. Their development and testing is of the utmost importance to the Committee, Congress, and the nation. We have come too far now to see a costly and destructive cancellation. However, the use of these assets and the missions and mission-sets on the "Journey to Mars" need to be better defined. As the NASA Advisory Council recently stated in a recommendation to the Administrator, the absence of a more fully developed plan would impair the ability of the next administration to propose a budget that "adequately support[s] NASA's Human Exploration Program."

While the administration has not provided many details on the plan for the "Journey to Mars," it has proposed possible mission options. For example, the administration has proposed an asteroid mission as the next step for human exploration. This has been caveated and altered multiple times, but generally speaking, the administration believes human astronauts should interact with an asteroid in cis-lunar space sometime in the next decade as a next step on its "Journey to Mars."

Despite opposition from space policy experts, scientists, and engineers, the administration as recently as last week announced early design work for the Asteroid Mission's spacecraft bus. With only nine meaningful months remaining in this administration, it is puzzling that they continue to press ahead with the mission despite widespread criticism and doubt over its efficacy.

The National Academy of Sciences released a study on human exploration called the "Pathways to Exploration." In this report the Committee on Human Spaceflight determined that the ARM mission largely contributed to "dead-end" technologies that could not reasonably feed forward into a human mission to Mars. Last year, the NASA Advisory Committee suggested to the Administrator that a more valuable use of NASA's time and money would be a Solar Electric Propulsion demonstration mission to Mars and back as opposed to the Asteroid mission.

Alternatives to the Asteroid mission proposed by the President have become ubiquitous in the policy discussions. For example, Jan Woerner, the European Space Agency Director General, has spent the last year advocating for an international lunar base. The recent "Humans Orbiting Mars" workshop presented a compelling, realistic, and affordable path to Mars. Also, several members of this Committee have suggestions and legislation as well. As the administration ignores these proposals despite a groundswell of support from scientists and engineers, we must look beyond what is politically expedient today and get ready for the next few decades in spaceflight.

As we prepare for the next President's administration, we must ensure that the plan in place for human exploration is based on sound engineering, planning, design, and management principles.

We have asked our witnesses today to give us their expert opinions for the way forward. This hearing is an opportunity to build consensus on the way forward for human spaceflight. Human exploration has a long and storied history of being non-partisan. It is not a Republican or Democrat issue, it is an American issue. We need to get the politics out of these important programs.

There are thousands of men and women in this country whose days are impacted by the decisions we make in this building. It is easy for people confined to the beltway bubble to forget that our pride as Americans comes from the hard work and determination to make this world better. The men and women at NASA working on our human exploration program are not pawns to be moved around a chess board in the latest game of chicken that the administration chooses to play with Congress. We must ensure NASA's work focuses on the will of the people, not the political whims of whatever President is in office at the time.

NASA's human exploration program has been through a tumultuous seven years. With a new President to be chosen by the end of this year, we must ensure that there is a constancy of purpose in our planning and a surefooted roadmap in place for the future.

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